

Richard Bradshaw on his wife Sarah's funeral

It was seeing the cluster of children standing around his wife's coffin that confirmed Richard Bradshaw's belief that she had made the right decision in choosing an unorthodox funeral.

At the heart of the huddle was his 11-year-old daughter, Ailish, who was busily explaining to her friends the names of the people in the photos that adorned her mother's casket. A chair had even been pushed up against the coffin to give the younger ones a chance to take a closer look.

"That really struck home to me," said Richard, a 45-year-old civil servant. "I just thought it was the most wonderful thing; here you had a coffin containing somebody's dead body, but the children were completely comfortable with it.

"I am sure it helped them demystify death and remove some of the taboos involved. Death is distressing enough without making it more so with the normal macabre ceremonial of a funeral."

And unconventional was the watchword for the way Sarah Bradshaw chose to have her life marked.

From the moment the 39-year-old HR advisor was told that it was unlikely she would survive the cancers that had compromised her immune system on and off for the previous 10-years, she set about planning her send off.

A plain wooden box, everyone dressed in black and the Victorian paraphernalia of the traditional English funeral was just not for her.

Instead, the mother-of-two chose to design her own coffin, featuring everyone and everything she adored, and have a funeral filled with laughter and memories of the fun loving woman she was.

Richard said the fact that Sarah was helped to achieve this by the designers at Colourful Coffins, made the process so easy.

The result was a casket covered in pictures of Cadburys mini-eggs, photos of her family and their black cat Rocky,



Sarah's coffin

a passionflower from the garden and cards that the children had written, saying 'I love you Mummy'.

"When the coffin came in to the church, that was when it became an extraordinary occasion," said Richard. "There was absolute astonishment. A lot of jaws gaped and there was an almost audible in-take of breath. It was very, very emotional at that point.

"I had seen the mock-ups of the design, but nothing had prepared me for quite the extraordinary sight it was - it was visually arresting."

For Richard, despite his monumental loss, the experience of knowing he had adhered to his wife's every wish at the funeral, is a soothing one.

"You wonder how many people in my situation tend to be swept along by what is expected to be the norm and don't have the opportunity or the confidence to ask for anything different," he said.

"For some people it may be an anathema or disrespectful. But it is something very personal and it doesn't have to be unconventional. Obviously in our case, Sarah had a good deal of humour.

"One of the most difficult things must be when people say 'X would have loved this'. I know Sarah would have loved this because she said so.

"I am not always so together about it, but the way in which Sarah allowed us to prepare for everything has made a fundamental difference to everybody, the children and myself, in being able to cope with it.

"One of the horrible ironies for her was that she wouldn't get to see the funeral. I firmly believe she would have been very, very proud. She would have laughed and approved."



Sarah Bradshaw and family

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